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ABSTRACT

One way to elicit good writing from students is to expose them to great literature and have them write about the attributes they share with a character, or about the experiences they have had that parallel those in a work of fiction, or about how a work of fiction compares with real "life." Using James Joyce's "Dubliners" as a primary source, students chose four related episodes that had made an impression on them and then wrote a separate and different kind of response for each episode, developing their own response techniques. The teacher wrote along with them, explaining the purpose of introductions, transitions, and synthesizing statements or theses. The students also read and wrote about Plato by writing dialogues of their own and using techniques borrowed from Gestalt psychology to dramatize and analyze conflict. In this way, students put themselves "inside" an issue and were forced to look at it from all angles. To learn to use outside sources, the students chose the five ideas they considered most significant in the dialogues, and wrote a summary of each followed by two or three original illustrations that could not come from their own experiences. Although these techniques are innovative, the students were taught the conventions of academic language while being encouraged to retain the idiomatic speech in which they were brought up. (SRT)

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POWER AND LIGHT WITHOUT ELECTRICITY

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A Paper Presented at

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This is the first opportunity I have had outside the classroom to demonstrate a technique I have devised for those of my writing students who find it extremely difficult to violate with a lowly substance like ink or pencil the gleaming purity of the blank page. Compose an intriguing but somewhat cryptic title, I tell them, and then explain it: display your ingenuity, then step back to interpret and justify your efforts.

Power and light without electricity? Well, when I join my writing class tomorrow I will enter a room that might as well be lit by kerosene lamps or candles. There will be no sign of the educational technology being discussed at this year's Conference. There will be no computers, word processors or even electric typewriters. Just wobbly chairs, an abraded chalkboard, assorted bits of chalk: I teach here at Brooklyn College, you see. And I will not have an overhead projector because by now it is too late to order one for tomorrow morning. All of which is to say, the only power and light in my classroom will be that generated by the written word: by what my students and I read, by what we compose in response to what we have read.

And my students and I read the best material I can find. In fact, I am a writing teacher who relies

heavily on literature, who believes that one way to get good writing from students is to expose them to excellent writing constantly and, whenever possible, to great writing. At last year's Conference I read a paper on how I had integrated some of that last-named commodity--the works of James Joyce, to be exact--into my writing courses. I still exploit Joyce: indeed, we have just begun reading Dubliners in English 2, and there is every indication that those stories will serve my current students as well as they did the students I taught last semester in the Developmental Education Program. At the Conference two years ago I talked about my experiences in drawing upon reader-response theory to teach developmental writing. I still make use of techniques based on psychoanalyst Simon O. Lesser's three categories of unconscious response: "identifying," "analogizing" and "appraising." That is, I still have my students write about the attributes they share with a character, about the experiences they have had that parallel those rendered in a work of fiction, and about how a work of fiction measures up when compared with "life," everyday life in Brooklyn particularly.

I think that this academic year I have become both more radical and more conservative. More conservative, or at least traditional, in my choice of material; more radical, or at least more playful, in my exploitation

of it. Last semester my DEP students and I read and wrote on not only Joyce but Plato as well. In fact, we advanced from the former to the latter, in the sense that we moved onward from narrative to exposition, which is more difficult for most DEP students. However, the major writing assignment I gave in conjunction with our reading of Plato resembled, and to some extent proceeded from, the one I had given in conjunction with our reading of Joyce. In both cases my emphasis was upon getting my students to abstract from what they had read, and upon having them do so with a view to synthesizing inferences drawn from separate narrative units.

With respect to Dubliners that went something like this. I had my students make a list of the episodes that had made a deep impression upon them: Farrington of "Counterparts" beating his son was a popular choice. Then I had them reduce their list to four by having them retain only episodes which they felt were connected in some significant way. That is, they had to look for a similarity in feeling, situation or characterization, and then to define that similarity as succinctly as they could--in one word if possible. "Victims," "indecisiveness," "alienation": these were a few of the words I got. And what amazed me was how close my students were getting to the standard interpretations of the Dubliners stories.

How could that be? I mean, Joyce is very difficult, isn't he? Well, one of the great advantages of teaching in DEP is that you meet students who, though they have been tyrannized in other ways, have not as yet had their responses to literature inhibited by the "difficulty ratings" applied to it by academics.

Four connected episodes: unity. Then came the diversity. For each episode my students had to write not only a separate response but a different kind of response. And I wanted them to go further than Lang drawing upon Lesser had dared to: they had to invent their own response techniques this time around, to determine form as well as content. All I provided were the impetus and the framework: my class, and I along with them, took it from there.

I did say, "I along with them." Perhaps I should emphasize that I always write with my class, that I also do what I tell them to do. Recently I read an article that extolled the virtues of writing along with the class, at least sometimes. Sometimes! How can a writing teacher not write with the class and still look in the mirror in the morning? And can a class of writing students have faith in a teacher who refuses to struggle along with them? Besides, by writing with my students I get a chance not only to exercise my skills but to test the difficulty and efficacy of my assignments. And there is yet another

reason, a very simple one, why I find it invaluable to write whenever my students do: I wind up with an ample supply of examples to use when needed, and in a writing class, where action speaks louder than theory, where it is usually so much better, and easier, to show rather than tell, examples may be needed every few minutes or so.

I wish I could describe for you all the response techniques my students invented. Some decided to address directly the narrator of the episode or the character(s) involved; others chose to rewrite the episode from the viewpoint of a secondary character. There were also direct interior monologues written on a character's behalf, and intrusions into the narrative which revealed what the reader would have done under the same circumstances. Yes: of course I could have devised these techniques myself, and of course I often had to coax my students somewhat to get them to be so outrageous. But my students themselves invented a number of techniques whose daring and originality genuinely surprised me. And, more important, in having such control over their responses, my students were more "responsible" for their writing than they had ever been before: they were not merely doing an assignment, but adapting, recasting and at times critiquing one.

What did the final drafts look like? What sorts

of essays did this freewheeling application of reader-response theory produce? Well, the finished products were not as chaotic as my description of the process through which they had evolved may have led you to imagine. I asked my students to write a short introduction, two or three sentences in which they were to tell me what it was that held the four episodes together. Remember: they already had a series of key words, so this part of the assignment was really a matter of definition, of expatiation. They had to treat me as if I were a "know nothing" reader, to mention names: Joyce's, the titles of the stories from which they chose their episodes, the characters involved. Background information and a synthesizing statement, or if you insist, "thesis": that was what the introduction was composed of.

As for the remainder of the essay, that was generally quite unified, both because of my insistence that the episodes share an important characteristic, that they all be in some significant way similar, and because of the care we accorded transitions--though, being a movie buff, I prefer the term "segue," and, I think, so do my students. We developed a simple, but effective technique. Although each response was preceded by a brief summary of the episode provoking it, the episode itself, at least in its original form, was put at a distance once the relevant page numbers were indicated in parentheses, a distance

that depended upon the boldness of the response. And we soon discovered that, in order to ensure a smooth segue to the next episode, we had to make a specific reference back to the episode currently the subject of response, naming once again the characters involved. That way beginning the next section of the essay, moving on to the next episode, was simply a matter of briefly restating what the episodes had in common, and then of inserting a minimal segue, a word such as "also," "similarly," "likewise." So one section of the essay might end this way: "I can't help remembering the experience I've just described whenever I read the episode in which Eveline stands paralyzed with fright as Frank boards the boat." And the next might begin like this: "Chandler in 'A Little Cloud' is also unable to leave Dublin." Yes: I have tinkered a little with the wording--this is as much an idealization of what my students wrote as it is a sampling. However, I was delighted to find that my class understood the need for the kind of "metadiscourse" I have demonstrated, even if they often had to turn to one another for assistance and, as a last resort, to me.

I have been talking about what my students and I did with Dubliners, but there is no reason why this diversity-within-unity approach, this generation of structured responding, could not be used with other texts.

Collections of short stories by a single author are very useful, because of their episodic nature and the recurring themes and motifs. But I can't wait till next semester when I will have my students write similar response essays on Othello or perhaps Macbeth. As I said earlier, I have become more conservative, more traditional, with respect to the material I select for my classes, while becoming more radical, and, I hope, more creative, with respect to my exploitation of it. I feel that my students need exposure to "great books" and to great ideas as well, that they in fact welcome this exposure, feel grateful they are not being treated like second-class citizens of academia.

Earlier I mentioned that after reading and writing in response to Joyce my students and I moved on to Plato, turned from narrative to exposition. Specifically, we worked with the Euthyphro, the Apology and the Crito, and I approached these three Socratic dialogues from the vantage point of, and with all the biases of, a writing teacher. Socratic "dialogue": to prepare my students for this form of discourse I had them write dialogues of their own. Using techniques blatantly stolen from Gestalt psychology, I showed them how to write scripts which both dramatize and analyze conflict: first we focused on psychological divisions, then on debates between two

individuals representing opposing viewpoints. Whatever the nature of the conflict, however acrimonious the debate, the writer identifies with, in effect "becomes," each of the antagonists, switching roles as often as possible, beginning with a polar opposition and slowly, grudgingly, moving inward from those extremes. Either the conflict is resolved because each side, having been completely "re-owned" by the writer, has now been modulated; or the impossibility of any sort of reconciliation is finally admitted, a finding of irreconcilable differences brought in. (As Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt, used to say: If we get together, fine; but if not, that's fine too.)

The idea behind all of this is to help students put themselves "inside" an issue: to get them to experience firsthand the reactions that taking a particular position might provoke, to anticipate counterarguments, admit exceptions, and to exert upon themselves the sort of pressure that can be relieved only by citing evidence, or making concessions. Take, for example, the issue of abortion: a script of the kind I have been advocating might dramatize a debate between a representative of those who argue that a woman's body is her own to do with as she chooses and a representative of those who are against abortion under any circumstances (or "pro-life," as a member of that

group would probably prefer to be characterized). An earlier script, one that would prepare a student for the exercise I have just described, might generate a debate between the internal Parent and the internal Child--as you can see, I borrow from Transactional Analysis as well as Gestalt psychology.

Sometimes, of course, conflict results in "paralysis"; and, of course, that is what some critics say Dubliners is all about. So before proceeding to ancient Athens my students and I returned briefly to turn-of-the-century Dublin: each of us selected a character who seemed to be experiencing a severe, perhaps paralyzing conflict; "Eveline," as you might expect, was a very popular choice. Using the techniques I have described helped generate a script on behalf of the character chosen, a script which became an essay that analyzed the conflict and predicted how the character would continue to be affected beyond the point at which Joyce chose to end the story. Yes, another reader-response device: boldly go where no reader has gone before, into the dark at the edge of the text.

When we started reading the Socratic dialogues I have mentioned, my students were well versed in the dialogue form. The next step was to have them appropriate the content of the Euthyphro, the Apology and the Crito: to embrace the concepts Socrates sets forth, and, at

the same time, to dislodge them from the context in which he does so. That is, I wanted my students to be "Socratic" under different circumstances. And to this end I had each of them select the five ideas he or she considered the most significant in the dialogues, and then write a summary of each idea, a summary followed by two or three original illustrations. (I have found that I cannot say I truly understand a concept until I can apply it in a context other than that in which I have encountered it.) The one stipulation was that my students could not use illustrations from their own experience: they had to use someone else's experience, an event they had heard about or read about. And yes: material being read in other courses was allowed.

What I was attempting here was to get my students to move outside themselves even further than they had while experiencing for themselves the psychological divisions of James Joyce's paralyzed Dubliners. Remember the sequence of the scripting I had them do: an internal opposition, then an issue which touched their lives, finally a conflict dramatized in literature. Besides trying to free them from themselves, and having them try to free Socrates' ideas from his time and place, I wanted my students to have the experience of using sources, of incorporating what others had said into what they were saying. I view

the process of selecting external material and integrating it into one's own prose as fundamental to academic writing. In fact, while they were proceeding with each of the assignments I have described, I asked my students to exchange material, either through interviews or by swapping rough drafts, and then to work some of what they were given into their final drafts, being highly selective as to just what phrases and sentences should be accorded that great honor.

Needless to say, technical skills such as quoting and paraphrasing can be developed by having students continually exchange material in the manner I have described. Indeed, I hope I haven't given the impression that I am one of those dreamers who hold that the form will take care of itself if the content is deep enough. On the contrary, I believe that the surface must be cultivated as thoroughly as the depths, that grammar, spelling, phrasing, and so on, are of primary importance. That's one of the reasons why I have my students read only the best writers, and why I write along with them and want them to relate to me less as a teacher than as an associate who just happens, at least for now, to write better than they do. They can of course say whatever they want to say, but through my example and editorial assistance they learn how to say it in a manner that is acceptable to the academic community. I make no bones about it: despite my emphasis

upon experimentation and my taste for such avant-garde theories as reader-response criticism, my aim is to show my students the rules of the game and to get them to conform to those rules, quickly.

And before I close I would like to say a few more words regarding linguistic conformity. The actor Sir Bernard Miles has remarked that everyone should learn the academic version of his native tongue but retain the idiomatic speech in which he was brought up. The latter he calls the language of the heart. But as much as I agree with Sir Bernard my job is, unfortunately, to suppress the language of the heart, or at least to show my students how they might sublimate the promptings of the heart into forms appropriate to the academic version of their native tongue. My students have retained the idiomatic speech in which they were brought up, and I find that I must teach them the academic version of English almost as if it were a second language. There is much talk these days, and much of it vague, about "voice" in writing. But a large part of my instruction amounts to helping students disguise their voices, develop alternate ones. Perhaps it is unwise to remind you of the frivolous word play with which I began this paper, but, because I am a writing teacher in the CUNY system, I cannot help linking the notion of electricity in the classroom with the acronym

WAT, for Writing Assessment Test. And my students can pass the WAT only if they manage to hide the fact that their speech is idiomatic, only if they are able to sound like speakers of standard English, the "idiom" of those who will be judging them. I rationalize what I do by telling myself that I am doing it for the good of my students, that I am simply teaching them to adapt, blend in, and this they must learn to do if they are to succeed at Brooklyn College.

That does help. But more comforting is the thought that I might be participating in a vitalization of academic English simply by immersing my students in it. That is to say, having mastered the conventions, they might then exert a subtle pressure upon the more arbitrary among them. When writing a formal essay, I have been told, you should use neither "I" nor "you"--such rigidity is best resisted from within. And I cannot but hope that the vivacity with which students like mine write academic English will help vivify it, that the cultural riches they write about will help enrich it. Perhaps, to exploit Sir Bernard's terms yet again, the academic version of our native tongue will begin to echo softly the language of the heart.